

Message Text

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SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: BILL BEGINS ITS COMMITTEE STAGES

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SUMMARY. THE SCOTLAND AND WALES BILL BEGAN ITS COMMITTEE STAGES JANUARY 13. WITH COMMONS SITTING IN COMMITTEE, THE BILL IMMEDIATELY RAN INTO A PROCEDURAL BRIAR PATCH AS ANTI-DEVOLUTION BACKBENCHERS WERE ABLE TO DELAY THE BEGINNING OF DEBATE FOR THREE HOURS WITH PROCEDURAL QUESTIONS. ON THE ONLY VOTE OF THE DAY THE GOVERNMENT EASILY DEFEATED A CONSERVATIVE BACKBENCH AMENDMENT DESIGNED TO KILL THE BILL. PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST DAY, ACCORDINGLY, CONFIRMED FEARS THAT THE BILL WOULD BE A SITTING DUCK FOR A FILIBUSTER AND THAT IN THE ABSENCE OF CLOTURE OR AN AGREED UPON TIMETABLE, IT WILL STAND LITTLE CHANCE OF PASSAGE IN THE CURRENT PARLIAMENT. AT THIS POINT THE GOVERNMENT IS JUST BIDDING ITS TIME, WHILE THE CONSERVATIVE LEADERS HAVE RELAXED PARTY DISCIPLINE ON THEIR MINIONS AND THE LIBERALS GOT THEIR WIRES CROSSED. END SUMMARY.

1. THE COMMITTEE STAGES OF THE SCOTLAND AND WALES BILL,
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WHICH WOULD DEVOLVE LEGISLATIVE AND EXECUTIVE POWER TO ELECTED ASSEMBLIES IN THOSE REGIONS, GOT UNDERWAY JANUARY 13, WITH THE HOUSE OF COMMONS SITTING AS A COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE. IT TOOK FULLY THREE HOURS TO GET THE BILL OUT OF THE STARTING BLOCKS WHEN ANTI-DEVOLUTIONIST BACKBENCHERS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE RAISED A SERIES OF PROCEDURAL QUESTIONS. IT WAS AN EFFORTLESS DISPLAY OF PRO-

CEDURAL WRANGLING, BUT FOR THE MOMENT AT LEAST THE GOVERNMENT SHOWED NO SIGNS OF LOSING ITS PATIENCE.

2. THE FIRST PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO BE CONSIDERED CAME FROM TORY BACKBENCHER IAIN SPROAT AND, IF ADOPTED, WOULD HAVE EXCLUDED SCOTLAND FROM THE BILL. IT WAS A WRECKING AMENDMENT. FOLLOWING A SOMEWHAT FACETIOUS DEBATE, THE AMENDMENT WAS EASILY DEFEATED BY 162 TO 30. THE COMMITTEE STAGE WAS THEN ADJOURNED UNTIL NEXT WEEK.

3. IN RELATED EVENTS, THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERS DECIDED TO RELAX DISCIPLINE ON THEIR BACKBENCHERS AND WILL APPARENTLY CONTINUE THIS POLICY EXCEPT WHEN IMPORTANT AMENDMENTS -- E.G. ONE WHICH WOULD EXEMPT WALES FROM THE BILL -- ARE DUE FOR CONSIDERATION. THEY ALSO REPORTEDLY DECIDED TO PERMIT A FREE VOTE ON AN AMENDMENT CALLING FOR PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN ELECTIONS TO THE ASSEMBLIES. RESPONDING, THE GOVERNMENT EASED WHIPPING INSTRUCTIONS TO ITS TROOPS FROM THREE LINES (THE STRICTEST) TO TWO LINES. LIBERALS, MEANWHILE, SEEMED TO BE IN A CONTRADICTIONARY MOOD. FORMER LIBERAL LEADER JO GRIMOND TOLD COMMONS THAT THE LIBERALS WOULD VOTE AGAINST THE BILL IN ITS FINAL FORM IF CERTAIN LIBERAL-SPONSORED AMENDMENTS ARE NOT ACCEPTED. THIS BROUGHT A QUICK AND ANGRY DISAVOWAL FROM THE LEADER OF THE SCOTTISH LIBERAL GROUP, RUSSELL JOHNSTON.

4. COMMENT. THE FIRST DAY OF COMMITTEE CONFIRMED WHAT MANY PRO-DEVOLUTIONISTS HAD FEARED: THE BILL WILL BE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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EASY PICKINGS FOR ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS BENT ON FILIBUSTER. IN ADDITION TO PROCEDURAL DELAY, OPPONENTS OF DEVOLUTION COULD INSIST ON ADDRESSING EACH OF THE 400 AMENDMENTS TO THE BILL WHICH HAVE ALREADY BEEN TABLED AND, IF THAT SUPPLY RUNS OUT, INTRODUCE MORE. ACCORDINGLY, IT SEEMS TO US THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL ULTIMATELY HAVE TO INTRODUCE A TIMETABLE OR CLOTURE MOTION, AN OPTION IT HAS CAREFULLY KEPT OPEN, IF THE BILL IS TO HAVE ANY PROSPECT OF PASSING IN THIS PARLIAMENT. THUS FAR THE GOVERNMENT IS ATTEMPTING TO WAIT OUT OPPONENTS OF THE BILL IN THE HOPE THAT THEIR DELAYING TACTICS WILL IMPROVE THE CHANCES OF COMMONS APPROVING CLOTURE.

ARMSTRONG

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